

The Upper Penitente Morada Chapel
Arroyo Hondo, Taos County

HABS No. NM-60

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
San Francisco, California

PHOTOGRAPH-DATA BOOK REPORT
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HABS
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28, ARROYO

THE PENITENTE UPPER MORADA

ADDRESS: Arroyo Hondo, Taos County, New Mexico
OWNER: Larry Frank, Los Angeles, California
OCCUPANT: Same
USE: Summer Residence

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

A religious confraternity known as the Penitente (Penitents) was popular in New Mexico during the nineteenth century. Members of the organization were especially active during Holy Week when they met in their chapel or meeting house called "morada" for vigils and acts of penitence. Consisting of flagellation and other acts of self-mortification, these religious observances were carried on outside the strict supervision of the Roman Catholic church. Late in the century the Church sought to discourage these extreme practices, and eventually it forbade the organization. In remote areas, however, Penitente groups continued with considerable strength until the 1930's. In recent years the extreme practices have lapsed, many of the chapters have dissolved and those that are left have returned to an orderly observance of Church-directed rituals.

The moradas of the confraternity were usually situated outside the village adjacent to the graveyard. Often a confraternity would control more than one morada. Morada design was by no means uniform; each chapter constructed its meeting house in accordance with site and such building materials, local resources and technology as it commanded. With the dissolution of the chapters the moradas have been abandoned or converted to other uses.

The architectural importance of the Upper Morada of Arroyo Hondo is that it typified these nineteenth century buildings which were once so common.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Physical History: The Upper Morada of Arroyo Hondo, the village has two such meeting houses, the one here mentioned and another lower down in the valley and nearer the center of the village, seems to have been built between 1852 and 1856. A deed of April 17, 1852, conveyed the land without mention of a building. (The price was one mare, one horse and four goats.) On January 2, 1856, the property including a three room building was sold for 94 pesos. (1) In these transactions no specific mention is made of the confraternity, but in New Mexico title to property used by the Penitente is usually held in the names of the principle brothers.

The morada is built over an earlier Indian site as is indicated by the presence of pot shards in the subsoil. A few feet to the southwest of the morada the rectangular outline of the Indian remains are clearly distinguishable. A large sunken area in the middle of the raised level of the ruins indicates the location where the adobe brick for the morada were most probably made.

In August of 1961 the property was purchased by Mr. Larry Frank and converted into a summer residence. The remodeling respected the original building as much as possible. The accompanying photographs were made after the new roof and a new adobe parapet had been added.

At least one other remodeling of the morada is evidenced by the commercially sawed roof boards in the large central room which bear a penciled inscription, "Marzo 18 ano de 1911". The adobe wall between this room and a small one to the west also attests a post-construction addition. This is proven by the manner in which the beam supporting the roof was incorporated into the wall. This partition subdivides what was a larger single room and probably accounts for the fact that only three rooms were mentioned in the deed of 1856.

ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

Plan: In general a Penitente morada contains a minimum of two rooms. One room, equipped with an altar set off by a railing or placed on a dais, serves as a chapel; the second, as a meeting room. Here the brothers gathered for their more extreme acts of penance. If more rooms were included, there was space for storage and a place to gather about a fireplace for less strenuous observances. A fireplace is never found in the chapel itself.

The morada at Arroyo Hondo, presently consisting of four rooms and two fireplaces, is more elaborate than most of those that survive. Irregular in shape and built with no interest in right angles, the structure is some 76 feet long and 40 feet at its widest point.

Fenestration: The extremely limited fenestration is one of the most important aspects of this building. For reasons of privacy during their religious services, the windows may have been kept small and placed high. But the paucity of windows is also typical of all New Mexican architecture before Yankee technology and commerce provided the glass with which to fill the windows and the iron tools with which to fashion the wooden frames. Spanish settlers, of course, possessed iron tools, but, constrained to trade only with Mexico some 1500 miles distant over deserts and mountains, metal was prohibitively expensive. There was no window glass in the area until it was brought overland by the Santa Fe Trail.

Eighteenth and nineteenth century houses had windows filled with small sheets of mica, with oiled paper or closed with solid wooden shutters. When window glass did become available, homes were quickly provided with them. It is only in a conservative institution like this Penitente chapter that the old-fashioned small windows were left un-enlarged. Since the morada is domestic in scale and entirely without ornamentation, it provides an unusually rare and interesting example of what early homes in the region might have looked like.

Massing: Architecturally the interesting thing about the morada is its compact, low-lying mass. Adobe walls are slightly battered and pull markedly inward near the top in soft, rounded contours. The masonry surface is warm and eroded like the hill top in which the morada stands. The solid massing of the edifice is all the more emphatic because of the few openings (one door and four small windows) to interrupt the planes. The soft-contoured massing is plastic and sculptural.

Interior: The floors of the chapel and meeting room are of wood; those in the other two rooms are of packed earth. Two corner fireplaces of adobe are found. That of the meeting room is unusually large for the region. The other, in room #4, is a more usual New Mexican design: quarter-round in plan, a tight parabolic arched opening, raised hearth, small rectangular flu projecting from the corner, edges rounded and the whole whitewashed so that it appears beautifully plastic and modeled in even the subdued interior light.

Site: The Upper Morada is situated on a hill top about one mile northeast of the church and plaza of Arroyo Hondo. The cemetery is immediately adjacent.

REFERENCES

1. These two deeds were filed in the Taos County Courthouse on March 24, 1925, Book A-27, pp. 607-608.

PREPARED BY Bainbridge Bunting January 1962
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